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PhD. Thesis Synopsis

FERTILITY, WORSHIP AND MONSOON AMONG AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES OF BARDHAMAN

Introduction

This thesis has tried to conceptually address the culture/nature dichotomy through an ethnographic study of Purba Bardhaman's agrarian communities. Rejecting both cultural and natural reductionism, the thesis argues for reimagining the boundary between human cultural lives and the environment they inhabit. To illustrate this argument ethnographically, I have looked at the farming community, traditionally regarded as operating within a natural economy, to show how the realm of the 'culturally imagined'—particularly religiously mediated experiences—works in relation to their everyday world of subsistence. I have therefore worked with both the natural world of these farming communities, in which rainfall is predominant, while also giving importance to their cultural world where again religious mediations are central.

Bardhaman, etymologically meaning a prosperous area in Bengali, is a highly fertile, flat, alluvial plainland situated between Bhagirathi, which flows along the eastern boundary of the region, and Damodar, which flows on the south and south-eastern part of it. Historically, the river Damodar had been described as the 'river of sorrow', as a highly aggressive river, associated with catastrophic floods in the pre-DVC (Damodar Valley Corporation) era (see Bhattacharya 2011, Singh 2017). Having changed its course a number of times since the 16th century, Damodar, along with its allies Bhagirathi and Ajay, its floods and tides, have designed the landscape topography of this region for long. Adding to this, there are diverse local fragmented stories that have also evolved through the course of this river- stories about religious legends, ferocious floods and local deities. (Mukherjee, 2021). These stories are well nestled within the geographical contours of the region, and yet, they transform into stories that extend beyond the natural to include those cultural contours which has flourished around the river like, what Bhaskar Mukherjee, in documenting the story of Damodar, calls the 'subaltern flow' (Mukherjee, 2021: 1). This is so because unlike other popular rivers like Ganga, Damodar and the culture which flourished along its banks has neither been sufficiently documented nor been covered by mainstream media.

The reason why Bardhaman is popular today is not because of its once vulnerable, flood-prone, ever-changing contours, but because of its highly agriculturally productive fertile plains shaping the agrarian life of the communities post-Independence. The story of human mastery of this 'river of sorrow' began with the Damodar Valley Corporation project, which established multiple dams and barrage, hydroelectric power and canal irrigation, transforming the flood-prone region into a fertile alluvial zone. In fact, it is mainly due to its status as a *danga jomi* (mainland) as compared to the *char jomi* (wetland) of the Bengal Delta that Bardhaman became the 'rice-bowl' of India, as the leading rice producing region in the country (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta, 2013: 80).

In the literature on the region, there is a clear opposition between natural and cultural registers, especially because the two have hardly been studied together in this area. Scholarly works on Purba Bardhaman have presented it as an almost monolithic, dry, rough and technologized agricultural space, paying almost no attention to its equally fundamental religious niches arising in conjunction with the community's agricultural life. The area has been represented mostly through discourses of nature, state and science, such as: administrative classifications, political divisions, climatic distributions and soil patterns. From pre-colonial to post-colonial times, Bengal and particularly Bardhaman has occupied the centre stage in the history of agricultural and rural development in India. This is visible from the vast amount of literature on Bengal's rural economy from the perspective of developmental and structural transformations such as caste, class, occupation and power. This includes works on caste and power by G.K. Leiten (1992), D. Roy (2011), Andre Beteille's (1972) analysis of agrarian social structure, studies on commercial agriculture and land reforms in Bengal by B. Chowdhury (1964) and S. Sengupta (1981), among many others.

My fieldwork in rural parts of Purba Bardhaman, however, predominantly involved an intensive study of how the religious world of its inhabitants can be situated within this portrayal. Do they subscribe to similar understandings of the place, or do they have their own ways of tracing relationalities to their land? Within a few months in the field, I grasped that in tracing the intermediation of nature culture in Bardhaman's agricultural lives, I frequently came across stories of village deities and their territorial integrity. Entire Purba Bardhaman, where I have worked, is distinctly characterised by the presence of several village deities and they have particular territories over which they oversee. Thus, my two important research questions were:

1. How does the religious lifeworld affect Purba Bardhman's agrarian communities' natural/ecologically driven subsistence?
2. How does the notion of *gramdevatas* address the nature/culture opposition in their everyday living?

My findings suggest that these deities and their modes of worship define the ways in which the farming communities not only live their cultural lives but also govern their natural subsistence. Therefore, the deities become active mediators of, what I have proposed as a dissolving of natural cultural lives. While its infrastructural and agricultural prosperity, rainfall and temperature conditions, fields and water bodies have been commented upon, the preoccupations of Bardhaman's farming livelihoods with their religious worldviews have not been highlighted enough. In my very serious opinion in the dissertation, not only does the religious worldview exists and mediates very centrally, their preoccupations with nature and culture, but also ties them and their bodies to their lands and histories. Therefore, Bardhaman and its agriculture as is celebrated globally cannot be understood without reference to people's embodied ways of doing religion. These territorial forms of religiosity, are interestingly related through the notion of inhabitation. As such, inhabitation became a powerful ethnographic concept to determine how religious engagements are rooted in everyday processes of place-making.

In 2018, I began fieldwork in a cluster of villages in and around Bhatar, which falls under Bardhaman Sadar North subdivision of Purba Bardhaman. After exploring several villages, I decided to base my work in five villages- Bhatar, Kulchanda, Balgona, Musharu, Bonkapasi. Among these, Kulchanda and Musharu attracted my attention for several reasons. Kulchanda

was home to a number of different castes- both high and low, and hence the caste dynamics played a key factor in understanding socio-political dimensions of *gramdevata* worship (a theme which I discuss extensively in the final chapter). Musharu was a village that was particularly popular as an example of human-animal cohabitation, since its inhabitants are involved in the deification of special varieties of snakes (This constitutes the third chapter). Balgona and Bonkapasi both worshipped male fertility deities- Hanuman and *Kalrudra* as *gramdevatas*, an apparent misfit within the goddess worship tradition. Bhatar was the centre of many developmental and infrastructural activities and consequently it has acquired the status of a 'town', with a railway station, fire station, hospital, school and the famous Bhatar bazaar.

It is worth mentioning here that the 'villages' I studied, does not represent the colonial imagery of 'primitive' or 'archaic' visions of India's rurality (Jodhka & Simpson, 2019). Neither are they self-sufficient bounded entities outside time and space. Rather, as my analysis will reveal, they are dynamic sites of power and contestation involving a range of actors- villagers, environmentalists, developmental workers, and the like. Thus, the 'village' in my study is not a radically different world from that of cities and towns. Participants in my study included farmers, predominantly middle-aged men, agricultural labourers- both men and women, people engaged in business activities like shop-keepers and young men and women employed in the service sector. Majority of them identified themselves as belonging to lower or lower middleclass families, while more than than 50% of farmers and agriculture laborers in the region were Ugra-Kshatriyas, although Sadgops, Goalas, Namasudras and Bagdis are also present. While they generally described themselves as *grambashi* (village inhabitants), all of them regularly moved, daily migrated to, or visited nearby urban zones like Bardhaman town and Kolkata. Their narratives equally highlighted their modern subjectivities amidst battles over identity, locality and religious morality.

Theoretical Engagements

A growing body of work shows how people's interactive experiences with nature are couched within the folds of their everyday practical engagements as well as symbolic representations of 'natural' in their cultural contours. The re-routing of nature from the periphery to the centre of social science inquiry was a severe response to the increasing preoccupation with environmental concerns. The contemporary ecological crisis calls for a reanalysis of human and natural history, and hence Dipesh Chakrabarty in 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' (2009), has demonstrated how historically, humans became geological *agents*, particularly in the wake of their modern capitalist subjectivities, thereby completely breaking the earlier separation between human and natural histories. Closely linked to such ecological concerns, there has been the rise of Humanistic Geography as a discipline in the later decades of the 20th century (Adam, Hoelscher and Till, 2001), at the root of which we find a specific idea of spaces; highlighting the politics of place and place-making. Further, Brian Wattchow also captures the fundamental role such material realities play in the 'development and sustenance of cultural identity'. As such, he reminds us that 'landscapes, places and cultures are ineluctably linked' (2013: 92). Scholars like Phillippe Descola (1996), Gisli Palsson (1996), and Tim Ingold (2000), among others, have also amply demonstrated how the nature/culture dualism is challenged in present times in anthropological inquiry.

Thus, in analysing the apparent dualism of the two domains- nature/culture, I have been influenced by the current literature on landscape and place-studies as well as anthropology of space. My ethnography also shows that, not only human experiences of space are embodied, but also that when humans 'inhabit' a territory, they are simultaneously also 'living' a cultural identity. At the same time, my work extends well beyond studies which interprets rural landscapes as timeless, static space invoking senses of nostalgia, beauty and order. As such, I agree with scholars like Turner (2018) and Hawkins (2013), who cautions against such static visions of rural spaces. Instead, I argue that landscapes are inherently identity-driven, they are dynamic sites of identity making, providing not only physical subsistence but 'psychological sustenance'. In a similar context, Shelly Egoz (2011) employs the concept of 'rootedness' as a landscape metaphor implying either a 'grounding in physical place' or a 'quest to belong'. Thus, according to her, ideas of landscape rootedness are also 'potent identity builders' (2013: 275). It is this notion of material/territorial rootedness, invoking a sense of belonging, which I find more relevant to my fieldwork experiences. So, I argue that a sense of belongingness and identity are crucial aspects of place-experiences. Throughout the thesis, I argue that landscapes are material realities crucially shaping relations among humans, between humans and the divine, between humans and animals, and also that between humans and the environment. In doing so, I draw inspiration from the work of Tim Ingold (2000), whose writing on the environment reminds us that inhabitation involves an active engagement with the constituents of the surroundings.

By bringing together dimensions of culture and environment, my thesis thus also contributes to contemporary issues of climate change. As evident, the discourse on climate change has equally induced a variety of responses to human nature relations today. Scholars have attempted to study environmental perceptions not simply as material but symbolic (Cosgrove, 2008), not only singular but multi-dimensional, not only 'mainstream' but also 'popular' (Vasan, 2018) and not simply conservationist but also human identity driven (Carse, 2006). Following this, many scholars have asserted that religious worldviews on nature and environment have hardly been addressed in environmental discourses. Some have also hinted at revisiting indigenous populations for their focus on images of nature and life as integral to environmental philosophy. Thus, while Martin Schonfeld (2013) argues that indigenous communities will make a comeback to global climate change discourses, Susan Crate (2011) observes that they are themselves affected by climate change patterns and thus requires reframing of livelihoods. Sonnabend (2012), on the other hand, believes that religion often provides interpretations that act as survival strategies, for instance, by blaming specific gods and goddesses for catastrophes. While such arguments do appear fatalistic from a rational scientific analytical lens, Gerten and Bermann (2011) argue that such interpretations can, however, help adapt to present climate impacts and future anticipations.

My ethnography depicts that Bardhaman's agricultural communities, not only reflects ecological attitudes through images of religious idols as harbingers of nature, subsistence and life in general, but also how, when faced with meagre monsoon or extreme hot conditions, faces an unprecedented challenge to their religious worldviews. Thus, my work involves understanding such religious beliefs and subsistence, both as threatened by environmental forces, while also enabling survival techniques to preserve it. For instance, I argue that even

when climatic changes have accentuated the precariousness of monsoonal rainfall in these regions, people find multiple ways of engaging, negotiating and coping with it. Therefore, in each of my analytical chapters in the thesis, monsoon finds its way within this complex web of human-land-divine relations. Sometimes, it is historically associated with malevolent forces having caused catastrophic floods, while at other times, its precarity heralds a threat to the survival and deification of animals, and hence, of religious worldviews. In its symbolic sense, monsoon often acts as a mediator between divine idols and fertility of Bardhaman's landscape, while also being equated with sacrificial blood as symbols of lifeforce and cyclical notion of time.

My analyses of such extremely diverse, local and embodied ways of doing religion also reflects gods and deities as more tangible, concrete, closer to life and everyday concerns (McDaniel, 2004). As such, they engage centrally with debates on South Asian popular religious discourses. While Banerjee (2002) describes these modes of worship as 'logic in a popular form', Lutgendorf identifies it 'as an orientalist trope for the primitive and debased' (2007: 38). In his studies on orientalism and religion (2013), Richard King suggests that South Asian divinities have been historically associated with notions of 'mysticism'. In a similar argument, Lutgendorf highlights, that terms like zoolatry, tutelary, animism, fetishism and the like were coined between 17th and 19th centuries 'in the wake of Europe's voyages of discovery' (2007: 39). For instance, European scholars like Monier Williams (1883) and William Crooke (1896) have documented village deities in India either as primitive objects of worship, or as remnants or offshoots of Sanskritic-Hindu deities. Indologists, in a similar vein, have documented extensively about the 'Great traditions' while paying little or no attention to indigenous and folk gods and goddesses (see Ghurye, 1969). On the other hand, anthropological works on peasant communities, like those by M.N.Srinivas (1995), Mckim Marriot (1955) and Robert Redfield (1947), have demonstrated the continued interaction between great and little traditions, between major pan Indian deities and local, folk and popular forms.

However, my fieldwork material, suggests the ambivalent nature of village deities, sometimes as offshoots of major classical deities, while at other times, refuting any relation with Sanskritic traditions. Moreover, in my field visits, I have come across different classes and castes of devotees owing allegiance to the same *gramdevata*. Thus, more than classifying village deities as 'classical' or 'folk', I describe them as subsistence deities, so vital to the everyday life of cultivators in the region. Alternatively, I also use the term territorial cults, since their religiosity provides avenues for territory-making. Thus, I argue that the village deities and the territories they oversee, gives anchorage to Bardhaman's farming communities and their relationships with natural cultures. More than their role in classical, semi-classical or folk traditions, they serve as central mediators of human-land relations in agricultural Bardhaman. In this sense, my work seeks to contribute to South Asian popular religion by showing how local deities are not tightly packed within religious and cultural categories but has the capacity to affect one's immediate material living conditions.

Relatedly, throughout my fieldwork, the category of Bengal folk Shaktism has constantly shaped my ideas and thoughts. A number of scholars like Kunal Chakrabarti (2001), June McDaniel (2004) and Hugh Urban (2005) among others, have amply established that Bengali

goddess worship reflects regional patterns, not found in other parts of India. One aspect is its intensely Bhakti flavour, conflating with ideas of blood, death, power, life- ideas at the core of Shaktism. This makes the blood-thirsty image of the village goddesses even more ambivalent. At the same time, Bengal's goddess tradition, unlike in other parts, dates back to the pre-Vedic times, thus making the non-Brahmanical antiquity of the goddess a valid argument. In such depictions of the goddess, she is described as all-encompassing, primordial nature, and as 'embodying mutually exclusive attributes' (Chakrabarti, 2001: 184).

My fieldwork, however, exposed me to many facets of these village goddesses, often overlapping, often contradicting. While all of them were fertility deities, only goddesses were associated with blood rituals. More than Shaktism therefore, my analysis was heavily influenced by two very integral aspects of worship- blood sacrifice and rain. I argue, all throughout the chapters an, especially in the last chapter, that blood and rain together constitutes the notion of fertility, not only as symbolic representations but as material entities. While goddess worship in Bengal have been amply demonstrated by anthropologists like McDaniel (2004), my thesis alternatively highlights the natural, material dimensions of such worship. Thus, the village goddess is not only a symbolic determinant of Shakti or life force, but actually brings to life its fecund qualities in people's everyday relation with the land.

Therefore, the story that I wish to tell here, is that of inhabitation in an agricultural landscape, permeated by religion. Thus, I have made a rough attempt to bring notions of climate change, nature-culture studies along ideas about South Asian popular religion and Bengal divinity into one coherent whole, which has been hardly attempted before. In doing so, *gramdevatas* have been important registers, since they are not like classical deities, but are embodied representations of nature-culture enmeshing. In the worship traditions of these deities, I have found natural and cultural elements; I have observed such sacrificial as well as animal worship traditions which have clearly demonstrated ecological, environmental, and subsistence dimensions of such practices. Interestingly in my thesis, I have also foregrounded two other stories very centrally- one of syncretism and the other of hierarchical realities- stories which makes the inhabitation process more nuanced. Thus, in what follows, I explore the concept of inhabitation as a product of the complex enmeshing of land relations, divinity, caste dynamics, animal deification and sacrificial traditions. In thinking about the concept of inhabitation therefore, I draw on Heidegger's 'dwelling' perspective (Roth, 2018), which describes 'inhabitation' or 'dwelling' as ontology. Heidegger points out that, dwelling is an existential condition; dwelling and being are one and the same. Additionally, inhabitation, as employed in my thesis, is not to argue for a logic of cohesion or unification of a given space. Rather, inhabitation, I argue, is as much about reciprocity, cohesion and syncretism as about living with differences and hierarchies.

In what follows, I have tried to understand inhabitation as it emerges through human-land relations in agricultural Bardhaman, a relation as much mediated by hierarchies of land ownership as through divine idols as embodiments of the land itself (Chap. 1); narratives of identity and belonging mediated by the worship of *gramdevatas* as territory markers (Chap. 2); politics of environmental conservation sparked by human-snake cohabitation reflecting animality as divinity itself (Chap. 3); syncretic religious traditions reflecting notions of subsistence and its unifying principle (Chap. 4); and animal sacrifice ritual reflecting sacrifices as cohesive forces and also politically mediated caste hierarchies (Chap. 5).

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 breaks the nature-culture divide through the idea of divinity. While land has traditionally been understood as material possession, this chapter shows that lands often get deeply associated with religious meanings, in a way that these meanings thoroughly constitute the sense of lands, place, and embodied living of people tilling and toiling in it. While critically looking at the mainstream perception of agricultural land as foundations of property relations, earthly domination, and masculine labour, I derive alternative understandings of landscapes as rooted in religious belief systems.

Following this idea, the chapter draws out the contradictions between the developmental literature on Bardhaman's landscape and my ethnographic narratives dealing with rain-fed cultural stories of village deities, floods, wetlands, strategic ways of dealing with rainfall concerns and in general, of human vulnerability. First, I look at the human-land relations in Bardhaman by placing it within the discourse of landscape studies. Focusing on how human-land relations have changed over time, I argue that while people's relationship with agricultural lands were based on property relations, class distinctions and economic power within Bengal rural communities, Bardhaman's social contours reveal how education, service-based occupations and 'respectable' professions in the private sectors of employment are the new material demands cultivating renewed aspirations.

My second argument in this chapter is to depict how the human-land relations are permeated through the divine. In this context, monsoon gains central importance since farmers narrate how they still rely on ritualistic arrangements related to village deities in their yearn for monsoon. Related to this, the chapter shows how the vision of monsoon among these communities is marked by both continuity and change; the attitude towards the season has a history. Thus, my interlocutors suggest that floods have shaped the landscape history for earlier generations and that the presence of wetlands still evoke negative sentiments from villagers; damaged, valueless, infertile and unmanageable, unpredictable as compared to the cultivable, fertile, drained land for the rice crop. As such, while lack of rainfall does affect their subsistence living, heightened emotions towards rain is manifestly visible in their monsoon-dependent religiosity.

The chapter concludes with the idea that Bardhaman's status of a *danga jomi* is not a fixed identity, but one that is shifting; its cultural lives equally informed by its wet imaginaries. Compared to the *char jomi* of the Bengal Delta, Bardhaman may appear to enjoy a relatively stable location, but this stability is rendered complicated when other 'wet' stories, enmeshed with monsoon-dependent religiosity, unravel the ongoing process of place-making.

Chapter 2 tries to dislocate Bardhaman as a farming utopia and rather thinks of it as a sacred landscape. While sacred geographies have mostly been understood as visited to, I try to understand it as inhabited by, i.e. how everyday life is inhabited in a sacred geography. The chapter introduces five village deities: the *Singabahini* goddess in Bhatar, the *Kulchandi*

goddess in Kulchanda, the *Jhankeshwari* deity in Musaru, the male deity Hanuman in Balgona, and *Kaalrudra* Shiva in Bonkapashi- all *gramdevatas* worshipped during monsoon, and associated with crop fertility, fertility of women and also the overall protection of the village.

The importance of monsoon is once again established in this chapter since all the five *gramdevatas* are periodically worshipped during this season. Narratives establish how feelings of longing, belonging, fulfilment, attachment to soil, and devotion to nature are all manifestly reproduced with these monsoon religious celebrations. Narratives further point out that, far removed from the classical deities of the Hindu pantheon, these *gramdevatas* are primarily local deities because no two villages that I visited worship the same *gramdevata,* and hence it is their bounded identities that make them firmly rooted in the soil. The chapter, additionally, also establishes the village deities as fertility cults associated not only with human fertility but agricultural prosperity. Thus, it offers a sharp contrast to the hard-hitting dry developmental and agricultural narratives of the place presented in the earlier chapter.

Chapter 3 shows how the landscape is inhabited through a relationship between the worshipper and the divine in very organic ways, vividly demonstrated through the snake worship tradition in the village named Musharu. The divinity of a sacred agricultural space, talked about in chapter 2, finds its expression here in the relationship between animal-human cohabitation. The chapter establishes that since the *gramdevatas* are closely related to everyday subsistence living, they are far removed from ideas of transcendence and instead are found as sometimes partly animal, partly human, partly natural.

Thus, in this chapter, I trace the centrality of animals' non-human agency as sacred beings involved in interactive experiences with humans. It explores the ways in which humans and snakes occupy a shared territoriality in Musharu, a small village to the north of Bhatar. For the people of Musharu, the sacrality of their village deity '*Jhangkeshwari*' is embedded in their practical ways of co-existing with special varieties of cobras as embodiments of the village deity itself. In this regard, the chapter presents two arguments. Firstly, I situate the human-snake interaction within the wider discourse of human-nature relationality, analyzing these snakes as exemplars of not only the sacred, but more holistically, sacred nature. Snakes thus stand in, as direct embodiments, of both religion and environment, and indeed, the two are not separate, insofar as the idea of life-as-such is lived in Musharu.

While there is a vast amount of academic scholarship on human-animal relationality which views animals 'not as a symbolic foil for human representation but as subjects whose agency, intention, and capacity for emotion are crucial aspects of forming such relations' (Govindrajan, 2018: 6), the cohabitation story in Musharu takes us beyond such horizons. This is so because snakes here are not only prototypes of the natural, but also manifestations of their sacrality. As such, there is a discrepancy between the narratives presented by the local conservationists and the villagers' own perceptions of their non-human residents. While the conservationists feel that the snakes are in need of scientific protection, the villagers do not believe in such interventionist techniques meted out to them primarily because the snakes themselves are protective figures for them.

The second argument draws attention to how the survival of these special varieties of cobras called *jhanglai,* has become a pertinent issue among the village community, since the adverse environmental conditions are affecting the species chances of survival in these regions. While conservationists too, have actively encountered and even appreciated local religious inhabitation and copresence strategies as productive, climate change concerns such as lack of

rainfall and overtly heated weather conditions, nonetheless, threaten the cobras' survival. Since they are more suited to monsoonal climate, which provides the breeding ground for these species; and while the rains make them more active and visible in the everyday lives of the villagers, conservationists argue, that rising temperature conditions make the snakes less aggressive, and thus less capable to fight for survival.

Thus, while their agency—animalist and sacred, and even, a negotiation of these—makes them superior in many ways to human assertions, monsoonal climate again brings them close, not only through practical experiences but through yearly religious celebration of *Jhangkeshwari*, in the month of Sravan. Again, that climate itself is under threat, as is the subsistence of these species, and in turn therefore, the ecology as a whole: the inhabitational cosmos including the people, snakes, the deity, and life-as-such. This is why villagers' narratives about conserving *jhanglai* posit complexities, since like the precariousness of monsoon and of *jhanglai's* existence, their religious lifeworld is also under threat. While they often realize the urgency or threat of *jhanglai's* disappearance from their sacred ecological lives, they are often also still highly reluctant to hand over their deity, a part of their very own habitat and lives, to outsiders, to humans who think of themselves as unquestioningly superior to the worlds they inhabit, worlds which are always also about non-human actants and their affective co-sharing.

Thus, this chapter addresses the environmental discourses surrounding snakes in Musharu in the wake of a consciousness about species' disappearance, and how it negotiates with people's conceptions about snakes as sacred deities. That is, how the now often discussed human-animal relations and their negotiations with climate change discourses, is further complicated by local cultures, specifically, religious worldviews of animal deification.

Chapter 4 explores the exegetical variations in the images of two village deities- *Jhangkeshwari* of the Musharu village, and *Kalrudra* of Bonkapasi village, both situated to the north of Bhatar. It argues that, although varied image constructions of these deities, point to understandings of religious syncretism in these regions of Purba Bardhaman, this syncretism is precisely made possible because of the *gramdevatas*' nature as bringing together natural and cultural logics into subsistence. In other words, subsistence is such a strong idiom among the farming communities of Bardhaman, that syncretism follows also. Thus, my analytical concern here is to present parts of Purba Bardhaman, as a fecund syncretism, capacitated precisely by a subsistence way of everyday living.

Following this logic of subsistence, which remains central to the farming community's ways of being in this world, I argue that the various religious sectarian distinctions between Shaiva, Shakta, Buddhist, Vaishnav traditions, in certain ways become one in Purba Bardhaman, because the subsistence logic has a basic unifying principle. I employ the concept of subsistence deities to describe both *Jhangkeshwari* and *Kalrudra*, who constantly represent a tussle between the local and the abstract. While *Jhangkeshwari* is more often closely related to *Manasa* as a semi-classical snake-deity, *Kalrudra* is associated with the classical deity Shiva. However, I argue that both *Jhangkeshwari* and *Kalrudra* are extremely localised forms of divine fertility, tied more immediately to people's everyday subsistence. Thus, the categories of the 'folk' and 'classical' too are immanently constructed, depending on the exact nature of the deities' embroilment with people's immediate lives. *Jhanglai* and *Kalrudra*, as localized subsistence deities, deviates from the images of Manasa and Shiva as an important inhabitation strategy. Even though *Dharmapal, Kalrudra and Jhanglai* are distinct deities, involving a

complex integration of Buddhism, Shaivism and Shaktism, as subsistence deities they are largely responsible for unifying the experiences of a sacred agricultural landscape.

Thus, in this chapter, we find two different registers of inhabiting a sacred landscape. One remains the way in which religious and cultural assimilation in these regions often take the language of subsistence, since despite differing ideologies and belief systems, the *gramdevatas,* as subsistence deities, ultimately tie them to agricultural labour. The other shows that inhabitation is also about appropriating a deity as unique, special and idiosyncratic, as the case of *Jhanglai* and *Kalrudra* unveils, thereby asserting more organic ways of relating to the land.

Chapter 5 explores the domain of animal sacrifices organized throughout the monsoon months during the annual commemoration of village deities. The culmination of religiosity gets its fullest manifestation during such blood rituals. Irrespective of specific differences among *gramdevatas,* all festivals dedicated to the village deities involve ritual sacrifices of goats and, in some cases, buffaloes. While sacrificial rituals have traditionally been symbolically associated with appeasement, exchange, communion, and cohesion (see Carter, 2003), in this chapter I argue that such acts are integral to notions of inhabitation as both cohabitation and contestation. I primarily do this by exploring the material dimensions of the ritual sacrifice-namely the animal body and the ritual blood.

While the notion of sacrifice conventionally remains tied to ideas of death, pain and violence (see McClymond, 2008 Adams & Girard, 1993), blood as a powerful signifying force of life's origin and regeneration, is central to the agrarian culture of Kulchanda village, where the majority of inhabitants are farmers. Blood has been the most powerful, evocative and symbolic bodily substance since earliest days of humankind. Bloodshed, whether natural as in case of menstrual blood or ritual, as in case of animal sacrifice, is a powerful symbol of life and birth, contrary to notions of violence. In Kulchanda, such bloody rituals constitute the substitution of life for life, such that, the animal blood is imagined to literally transform into the blood and flesh of the fertile land itself. Thus, while in chapter 3, villagers illustrated the link between people, lands and environment through the deification of snakes, devotees of *Kulchandi* exemplified this link through the metaphor of blood, where blood is not symbolically but materially present in sacrifice rituals.

Additionally, in such narrations, the significance of monsoon, is once again invoked where inhabitants equate the fluidity of blood and rainwater as life force. My interlocutors often compared blood metaphors to that of rain. Menstruation or sacrificial blood, both constitute the reproductive life cycle, and is hence often likened to rain in conceptual understandings of sacrifice rituals since rain also follows a cyclical notion of time. Just like women are considered to be more fertile after menstruation, similarly, seeds are sown only after the monsoon rain. This also explains my respondents' emphasis on the *jagroto* (alert) nature of *gramdevatas* during this season. Thus, blood and rain together ensure the fertility of the soil and monsoon is precisely the cycle of life that is being ritually relived through sacrifice.

The literal presence of the sacrificed blood, gushing from the animal's body, evokes sensations of awe, reverence, fear amongst them. Govindrajan describes this as an "embodied" practice; the sacrificial victim being a 'fleshy being' always entangled and "grounded in lived material

relations" (2018: 55). Thus, I offer the idea that the symbolic character of sacrificial rituals become more meaningful when grounded in everyday cultivating practices of communities.

However, while blood remains an important marker of such material relations and cohesive forces, it simultaneously also reflects hierarchies, exemplified both through human-animal differentiation as well as caste difference between humans. In chapter 3, I had shown how the human-animal cohabitation, emerging from recognition and not erosion of difference, marks a distinctive organic way of inhabiting the land. Relatedly, this chapter also shows that the story of cohabitation does not imply an obliteration of divisional forces within the landscape. As Govindrajan points out, 'Mutuality and connection does not imply an erasure of difference and hierarchy' (2018: 5). Thus, even when the animal is a mediator between the human and divine, or a fellow-kin, or a child of the land, it is an embodied being, composed of blood and flesh, reflecting its hierarchically inferior status.

The other dimension of inhabiting difference is the perpetuation of human hierarchies like caste, exclusively expressed not only during such rituals, but extends to encompass the social organization of the village generally. In understanding such caste dynamics, I employ Bhrigupati Singh's concept of 'agonistic intimacy' in his analysis of the oral-epic deity *Tejaji* in the villages of Rajasthan (2011). He describes agonistic intimacy as 'a way of engaging the copresence of conflict and cohabitation' between different castes. In Kulchanda, caste relationships determine not only one's political domination, but also claims over the village deity as one's own clan-deity. This is specifically done through the identity of the Ugra Kshatriyas, a numerically dominant caste in these parts of Purba Bardhaman. The Ugra Kshatriyas' power dynamics in society is mediated through such sacrificial rites and ceremonies, marking their caste-specific inhabitation. As the chapter depicts, Nimai's identity as an Ugra-Kshatriya and his obligation of arranging the sacrificial worship of the village deity is further complicated by his Vaishnava status. This is so because *shaktas* and *vaishnavs* are thought to be very opposed religious traditions in general and often the main ground of opposition is blood sacrifice. Nimai's higher caste Vaishnava status, coupled with his organization of sacrificial rituals devoted to a Shakti goddess speaks of a complex caste-sacrifice nexus. This, in turn effectively complicates arguments about group cohesion and solidarity. Therefore, I argue that inhabitation constitutes both cohesion and differentiation, fueled especially by two kinds of blood markings- caste identities and animal sacrifices.

Thus, ways of managing the sacrificial ritual, performing the sacrificial rite and eating the sacrificed animal reveal contested experiences of castes in the village. In theorizing about sacrificial practices as both cohesive tendencies and hierarchical realities therefore, I locate such forms of caste assertions and resistances as also ways of inhabiting a landscape. It is through these contradictory assertions, claims and authority over Kulchanda and its village deity, that people are constantly involved in the process of place-making.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate inhabitation of a sacred agricultural geography. While farming aids the inhabitation process in Purba Bardhaman, the mode of inhabitation involves

an enmeshing of natural cultural lives. Divinity, exemplified through the concept of *gramdevatas*, is the embodiment of this inhabitation, while the method or rituals of worshipping this divinity is sacrifice traditions, and/or deification of animals. Finally, the effect of inhabitation is the various ways of cohesion, expressed either through religious syncretism, or monsoonal celebrations. But there is yet another socially and politically mediated effect of this inhabitation, which is caste differences maintaining and strengthening themselves, such as we find in case of sacrificial rituals of *Kulchandi*. Thus, going back to the two major arguments of the thesis, that, in understanding Bardhaman's natural ecology, I cannot ignore the religious aspect and secondly, the best method of breaking the nature/culture opposition is the notion of *gramdevatas*, who being different from classical deities, somehow remains essentially tied to human's everyday lived subsistence, to their caste and other political differences; to their organicized ways of relating to land.

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